# TO BE A POET

BY J. E. McKNIGHT.

"It is to want a friend, to want a home,
A country, money—aye, to want a meal.
It is not wise to be a poet now,
For the world has so fine and modest grown
It will not praise a poet to his face,
But waits till he is dead some hundred years,
Then uprears marbles cold and stupid as itself."

So sang in bitterness "the wild songster of Oregon" in the long ago. But he was a raw, unlettered youth then—a tall, loose-jointed, languishing, dreamy, gawky backwoods boy. The smell of burning pine was in his scant wardrobe, and the odor of new-mown hay and of wild flowers fell out of the wealth of long yellow hair that was then his only aureole. He had more feeling than intellect—the poet must have—and so he suffered; more insight, more intuition than culture, for of this he had none in those early years. He had no ducats and no friends, but high resolves, sweet hopes, and roseate dreams were his. And the wolf was at the door.

It is different now. Time flies. Great changes are wrought. The impossible comes to pass. There is bread in abundance, and fine raiment for which he does not care. And money, the jingle of the guinea—yes, the guinea, for the dollar is yet withheld. Well, auri sacra fames never clutched at his soul; but there is money enough—more than he can use. Friends? They are legion—the very elect of the earth, too; other poets and prophets, Tennyson and Browning among them; great statesmen, for instance, Gladstone; great lords—Lord Houghton introduced him to Gladstone; fine ladies, and others. Such was the anabasis of the stump-digger. And so he won. Let the proud and sensitive home-spun lad who is spurned by the counterjumpers, the railway clerks and the nouveaux riches of "society" lift up his head and walk with the leaders of men—with nobles and priests and kings.

Saturday, July 15, was Joaquin Miller day at the Lewis and Clark fair. Joaquin Miller is nearly 70 years old now, and the recognition seemed a little tardy, but Oregon is slow. It came, however, in the form of a reception in the Oregon building. Thousands attended. There was such a jam, indeed, that the papers could say on Sunday that it was a brilliant social event. I really believe that Portland "society" felt it was honoring this grand old man! The poet of the Sierras, high top bots, red cap and all, was there and made a speech—a long, rambling, incoherent speech, made up of reminiscence and tears, poetical ejaculations, humorous anecdotes, and fierce attacks on those who use the nasty word Webfoot or say Rogue, instead of Rouge river, or fail to pronounce correctly other beautiful French and Spanish names that dot the map of the auriferous west. I'm glad he did, for our phonic sins are many and scarlet and unforgiveable. It was a poet's speech, not a barrister's or a pedagogue's. And it was good to see this old man of world-wide reputation standing higher in Europe, too, than in his own America, take these people to his bosom and forgive them all, not in word, be it remembered, for there was no hint of that; to hear him speak to the neighbors and friends—or those who should have been the friends—of his hard and desolate youth, and to the sons and daughters of those who had neglected him in the day when he needed love and sympathy more even than food or clothes, and especially needed to be understood and appreciated. Listen to this:

"Mistaken and misunderstood.
My hot magnetic heart sought round
And craved of all the souls I knew
But one responsive throb or touch,
Or thrill that flashes through and through.
Deem you that I demanded much?—
Not one congenial soul was found."

Can you see the youth I have tried to picture and read that without a lump in your throat? There is an exile that is worse than that of Heine, worse than that of Victor Hugo, worse than that of Ovid puling for his Rome. Joaquin Miller felt it and was chilled to the marrow. When his "Songs of the Sierras" was brought out in London, the Academy, the Athaeneum and the Saturday Times acclaimed a new poet of rare power and great sweetness, while the country weeklies of Oregon yapped their disapproval. In this first volume there was a beautiful poem called "Oregonian;" in the second edition it appeared as "Dark-Eyed Ina." Revenge. So he adopted California, where he has lived, near Oakland, ever since. In that first book, "Joaquin" was a great favorite in England, and in a later edition it was changed to "Californian." More revenge! 'Tantaene animis coelestibus irae?" asks Virgil. Angers so great in minds celestial? Oh, yes; and why not? Would you have your poet turn the other cheek? Perish the thought! Let another wear the crown that should have been Oregon's.

Joaquin Miller was christened Cincinnatus Heine. Now what do you think of that for a Christian name? But his father was a sort of combination farmer and schoolteacher—that accounts for it. Stonewall Jackson was not "Stonewall" till he was dubbed that at the battle of Bull Run. The brand at the baptismal font sometimes washes out; and so, after the appearance of his first great success, C. H. became "Joaquin" Miller. "Joaquin" sticks.

Joaquin Miller is today Oregon's proudest product. He was brought up at the little town of Eugene. He knows what it was to be the child of a pioneer in a realm where wilderness was king, where the forces of nature were great, despotic, unreasonable giants; where, when the forest was cleared, the briars grew ranker and fiercer and the snakes so numerous that hogs had to be imported to devour them. The brown bear, the red deer, the squirrel and the beaver were almost his companions. The red men of the forest were his friends and teachers; he learned their language and can speak it yet. And so were the flowers he loved and the birds that sang for him and taught him now. And the mountain peaks bathed in eternal glory—they were heroes in his self-made mythology. The waterfalls were beautiful maidens with streaming tresses. The vales and dells, dusky and cool at midday in summer, were peopled with gnomes and fairies and dryads. But the twin-jailers of youth were there, too, and there his heart burned and swelled, and burned and swelled and burst—burst forth in song at the age of 13. Joaquin Miller says that he worked in those days, worked hard, but I doubt it. Most men think that when they were boys they had to work like Hercules. I somehow think that he spent much time in lying on the moss under the great fir trees, and gazing up through the velvet hush and gloom of their dominion at stars that reveal themselves at noon. There he dreamed dreams and saw visions and made high resolves. There the mute solitude passed into his soul and became vocal in a great river of song.

At the reception a man with a nonconformist face said to me with a self-righteous sort of vinegar grin, "I don't know that I care to shake hands with Joaquin Miller." "Why not?" said I, surprised, for the old poet was at that moment the center of a remarkable demonstration. "Oh," he replied, with a shrug, "his poems are very filthy—some of them!" It was one of the old pack. Now a man like that would Bowdlerize the poems of Alice and Phoebe Cary. But I wondered if Joaquin Miller had written something like Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis," or Byron's "Don Juan." Memory, research and inquiry fail to reveal that he did. There is nothing even like Rossetti's "Jenny," or "The Wife" of Stephen Phillips, and there might have been—God knows there might have been. It is the law of life.

But his poetry is sensuous—not sensuous as Rossetti's is, as Swinburne's is, but in that it appeals first of all to the senses. It is full of warmth and life and color. It chronicles the progress of the red corpuscle. It is full of the joy of living. It is resonant and virile and snappy. It is robust—sometimes shaggy. It sings of love, but it is not erotic and silly—Joaquin Miller is no Della Cruscan. It runs the whole gamut of human experience—especially experience in the great untamed, incomprehensible west: the west of the Argonauts, the west of picturesque and almost meritorious desperadoes, such as Joaquin Murietta, the west of the vigilantes, the west of those who felled the forest, grubbed the undergrowth, opened the furrow and sowed the seed that we, according to the promise, might enter in and reap a harvest of treasure and beauty.

He was young when he wrote this:

"She was more than fair
And more than good and matchless wise,
With all the love-light in her eyes,
And all the midnight in her hair."

And he was young, too, when he sang—

"If earth is an oyster, love is the pearl
As pure as pure caresses;
Then loosen the gold of your hair, my girl,
And hide my pearl in your tresses.
So, coral to coral and pearl to pearl,
And a cloud of curls above me,
O, bury me deep, my beautiful girl,
And then confess you love me."

Lyric poetry—and all that is best of Joaquin Miller's is lyric—is a vivid expression of personal experience; but I am not so literal as to think that all lyric utterance is necessarily autobiographic. Petrarch had his Laura, Titian his Flora, Wordsworth his Lucy, Landor his Rose Aylmer, Burns his Highland Mary, and Poe his Annabel Lee; but they were not all real personages in the flesh. Were they not all, rather, to a degree at least, creatures of the imagination?

But he also sang:

"I tell you that love is the bitterest sweet
That ever laid hold on the heart of man:
A chain to the soul, and to cheer as a ban,
And a bane to the brain, and a snare to the feet.

Aye, who shall ascend on the hollow white wings
Of love but to fall—to fall and to learn,
Like a moth, and a man, that the lights lure to burn,
That the roses have thorns, and the honey-bee stings?"

That may be autobiographic, for he was divorced from his first wife. They say that he was wedded to his art and dreamed of a career while she pined and pined for more love than he had for her. Anyhow she went on the stage awhile and died soon after.

Joaquin Miller has the poet's catholic estimate of all men. Nor would he allow one man to be painted all black in order that another beside him might appear all white. Of Byron, when he was being hounded and stung almost to the death, he said:

"In men whom men condemn as ill
I find so much of goodness still,
In men whom men pronounce divine
I find so much of sin and blot,
I hesitate to draw the line
Between the two where God has not"

Byron, it may be said here, is the candle in whose fierce flame our Miller nearly lost his wings. But he was too virile and too individual long to remain a captive in the chains of imitation. Here is a dainty thought:

A little bird
From bunch of grass flew sudden out
And, swinging, circled sharp about,
Then tangled in a spangled tree,
And there, as if the whole world heard,
Began his morning minstrelsy."

And here is another:

"The sounding trees,
The passionate sun, and the resolute sea—
These were my masters, and only these.
I but sing for the love of song, and the few
Who loved me first shall love me last;
And the storms shall pass as the storms have passed,
For never were clouds but the sun came through."

I think passages like these are no less limpid and mellifluous and optimistic than this from Goethe himself:

"Ich singe wie der Vogel singt,
Der in den Zweigen wohnet,
Das Lied das aus der Kehle dringt,
Ist Lohn der reichlich lohnet."

Just dip into the music of this:

TO JUANITA.

Come, listen, O love, to the voice of the dove,
Come, hearken and hear him say,
"There are many tomorrows, my love, my love,
But only one today."

And all day long you can hear him say,
"This day in purple is rolled,
And the baby stars of the Milky Way,
They are cradled in cradles of gold."

Now, what is the secret, serene gray dove,
Of singing so sweetly alway?
"There are many tomorrows, my love, my love,
But only one today."

To hear Joaquin Miller recite that is to understand what W. B. Yeats means when he speaks of old Irish interpretation of a poem as a combination of reading that is not elocution and music that is not singing.

Nor are these purple patches either. Pebbles of such iridescence so strew the beaches of this lyric river that it is difficult to choose among them.

The story goes that once the poet was invited by Spurgeon to hear him preach upon a certain day. But his wardrobe was scarcely proper for the occasion, and so he ordered some new clothes and a new pair of boots. When they came neither fitted. He struggled and struggled, but could not even get the boots on. So he gave up in despair and did not hear Spurgeon. But he sat down and wrote the "Arizonian" instead. Grammercy, old boots!

"What message have you for Utah?" said I to Mr. Miller.

"Message? No message," said he; "but tell them that I came early as their fathers did, that I worked hard for civilization as their fathers did, that I made some mistakes as their fathers did. They were a courageous band, those pioneers of Utah were. They helped to build an empire in the wilderness. I have great admiration for them."

"But," I ventured, "you wrote 'The Danites.'"

"Yes," he said rather sadly, I thought, "and I'm afraid it hanged John D. Lee."

There was a smoker in honor of the Oregon bard in the evening of that same reception day. They say—on dit again—that at those affairs men smoke great big strong cigars (oh, my!) and drink champagne (now what is that, I pray?) and eat like Odyssean heroes, and exchange depews—as long as they can see one another, or, rather, as long as one man doesn't look like more than two! Max O'Rell has said that America doesn't allow her schoolmasters to do such things or to vote aloud. Very well, score another one for America. But some day, when I can stroll away off somewhere and lose my identity, I'm going to go to one of those smokers and see with my own eyes what sort of rites and orgies are indulged in.

I am not quite sure after all that I wish to be a poet—unless I can be a statesman-poet like John Hay or a banker-poet like Edmund Clarence Stedman or a miner-poet like Tod Goodwin (Tod is a minor poet, isn't he?). A poet of the long-haired, star-eyed, red-flannel-shirt variety is the center of so much non-dividend-paying curiosity and controversy. As Bar Zeeder somewhere says:

The poet is the worst of men,
But who as he so blest of men?
The poet is the best of men,
But who as he so curst of men?

J. E. M'KNIGHT.

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### W. K. Vanderbilt's Anecdote.

(Philadelphia Bulletin)

"I heard W. K. Vanderbilt talk the last time I was abroad," said a Pittsburg man. "It was at the Grand hotel in Rome, and Mr. Vanderbilt dined at the table next to mine. He had just returned from a long trip in a motor car, and his talk naturally dealt with motoring in the main.

"Mr. Vanderbilt said that there were a good many pains and woes incidental to motoring. Most of them, though, could be avoided by good management.

"He said he knew a man who had started with a friend on a week's tour in a big car, and they had stayed two weeks because they enjoyed themselves so much.

"When finally they got back to town it was a Monday night, and late. Mr. Vanderbilt's friend, timid boaut his reception, went home, and wife received him as coldly as he had expected she would do. What he dreaded, though, was an explosion—an hour's scoldings and upbraidings. As he talked, he tried to think of some way to escape this explosion and finally an idea came to him.

"'I am so glad to be back here with you, dear,' he said. 'But I pity Pitcoe. Poor old Pitcoe!'

"'What is the matter with Pitcoe?' said the lady, sharply.

"'Ah, poor fellow,' said her husband, 'at this moment his wife is giving him the very old deuce!'

"The lady's manner softened. That wily speech got her husband off. She would not show herself a common scold like Mrs. Pitcoe."

### Professor Wood's Question.

(Boston Herald.)

Professor Wood of the Harvard Medical school, while visiting some friends at Falmouth, was called upon to attend an old lady troubled with a serious attack of epilepsy. Curious to know the details, he said to her husband: "Does she ever grind her teeth at night?"

"Well, I don't know as she wears them at night," said the husband.